

Beans Again!

Based on the life of James Dixon Turner

This is the day which the Lord has made;
we will rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 118:24

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Names have all been changed except for James
and his parents, Roy and Sally Turner.

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Temptation Calls Chapter 1

He never meant to take enough that anyone would even know there was any gone. Especially his mother! She had baked the round, layered cake during the coolness of the early morning, and covered it lavishly with creamy chocolate frosting. It stood proud and tall, alone in the middle of the kitchen table like Babe Ruth in the batter's box. Busy with her morning chores, his mother had left it complete, awaiting dinner.

Not that he was idle with nothing to do when the temptation first entered his thoughts. His dad was always saying, "Idle hands are the devil's tools." James was never sure if that was true or not because there were always plenty of chores to keep a growing boy out of trouble.

That very morning, James was busy obeying the instructions his dad had given him before leaving for work at the grocery store. "Get that wood split and stacked out back, Son, and be sure to bring enough in for the cook stove." The end of summer, 1932, in Danville, Virginia, was typical--hot and dry.

James eyed the cake hungrily on his first trip in with the wood. "Fits," he said to the dog at his heels, "the girl that becomes my wife will have to like her cake without the frosting! It's all mine!" The dog eyed his master lovingly, and put down the piece of kindling in his mouth to bark his approval. His front paws pranced from side to side while his back legs stayed put, his head keeping a crazy tempo. Barking loudly, he buckled at the knees and rolled onto his back, wagging his whole body along with his scruffy tail, his legs suspended in mid-air. Hence the name, Fits.

"Come on, boy. We've got to get another load of wood." James willed himself out the back door with Fits right behind him. The morning coolness was disappearing fast and James rolled up his sleeves, as he broke into a sweat. He was tall and skinny for a twelve year old, built like the legs of a gangly newborn calf. Yet he handled the axe expertly with strength that belied his scrawny frame.

Still a boy, he was used to doing a man's work. Thunk. Thunk. Each blow was true to its mark, developing a rhythm that stopped short when the wood spilt in two. Another piece of wood positioned on the stump, and the beat began again.

On any other day, James would have felt a sense of pride seeing the pile of split wood grow. But not today. His mind was not on his chores. Like the axe's steady return to the crack in the wood, his mind repeatedly returned to the tantalizing dessert in the kitchen.

"It just doesn't seem right." James complained to no one. "A fella working all morning without a bite to eat, and a whole chocolate cake just sittin' there waiting to be eaten!" Fits turned an attentive ear. Whatever James said, the dog would not argue.

Wood in tow, James returned to the house. No sign of mother in the deserted kitchen. "It's okay, Fits. Just one little finger-lick," James said, as if convincing the dog meant everything would be justified.

Fits was an easy convert, watching eagerly while James took his fore-finger and made one long sweep across the top of the cake. Instantly the collected chocolate disappeared into James's mouth, and he smacked his lips in pleasure. Fits paced in anticipation, knowing his turn was next. Using the same finger, James made a squiggle through the lush topping, endeavoring to cover up his tracks, then extended his finger to Fits.

And so it began.

At first, it was just one finger-lick per trip into the kitchen. But soon, James was absorbed in his task—extracting the frosting and then patching the evidence. Each mouthful he intended to be the last, but there was always one more spot of frosting that seemed to beg his attention.

Suddenly, the cake stood stripped and unclothed, naked as a boy skinny-dipping at Apple's pond. The realization came to James all at once. He fell back as if he'd been struck, and surveyed the denuded dessert as if seeing it for the first time. Only sliding-finger tracks gave evidence of what had once been.

"James Dixon Turner!" His mother appeared in the room like a sheriff on a thief. "I declare in my time...! I'm going to jerk a knot in you fo' sure!"

But all that acknowledged her threat was the back screen door swinging noisily on its hinges. It slammed with a bang that sounded like a shot from a gun. James and Fits, caught red-handed, ran like escaping convicts, guilty as charged! In an instant only a trail of dust on the country dirt road gave proof of their flight.

School Days

Chapter 2

There are not many things worse than being 12 years old and still in the 5th grade. Standing a head taller than his classmates accentuated James's humiliation. He felt like he was wearing a sandwich sign announcing to the world, "Look at me--I'm stupid!" It didn't take a genius to figure out why a boy his age would be in the classroom with kids two years younger. It was only the first week of the new school year, and already James hated going.

"Dad, do I have to go?" James pleaded.

His father, Roy Turner, showed no surprise as he lifted his eyes from his plate of snowy white grits and red eye gravy, and calmly looked at his wife.

"Mizz Turner, what do you say?" Soft-spoken, Roy always addressed his wife with this title of respect. But James knew there was no question he would be going to school that day, and every other day for that matter.

Sally put another log in the black betty, reached for the hand knitted potholder to wrap around the coffee pot handle, and silently refilled her husband's cup. Imprints of her were everywhere throughout the kitchen. She had sewn the bright blue curtains hanging at the window over the sink and matched them to the blue entwined through the calico tablecloth. In James's mind, it was impossible to separate his mother from the kitchen, as if one would not exist without the other.

In no hurry, Sally returned to her place at the foot of the table. Only then did she speak. "James, you know it's not your fault. You were awful sick the first year you went to school. I blame myself for not keeping you home an extra year. Spinal meningitis is serious. You almost died."

"There's not a day goes by, Son, but what your mother and I thank God for sparing your life." His dad picked up where his mother left off as if they were thinking the same thoughts at the same time and it really didn't matter which one was talking. "I remember you burning up with fever and talking out of your head. We had to rush you to the hospital. You wouldn't move your neck for days—not even to turn your head from side to side. You kept it rigid as a rifle barrel. I thought sure it would freeze that way. You'd look pretty funny running around like that today!" His father chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

James was not amused. "The other boys don't know that, and every time I try to tell them how sick I was, they just laugh and say, 'Oh yeah? I don't remember you being sick last year. What's your excuse for that?' And they walk around stiff-necked with their arms stretched out wide like Frankenstein. I don't think it's one bit funny!"

"James, I know it's not easy, but the boys do like you." His mother tried to encourage him. "Why that sweet Johnny Wilson's over here every day asking for you. I think he looks up to you because you're older."

James sat dejected with his head down. His parents waited quietly knowing there was more. Clenching his jaw rather than cry, James struggled to speak. "What if...."

His thoughts tore at his stomach and he felt like he was going to throw up all over the kitchen table. "What if I fail again?" Miserable, he wilted in a crumpled heap on the table, burying his head in his arms as if he wished life would just go away and leave him alone. Saturday and Sunday were great, but come Monday morning, all James could see was the hopelessness of ever getting out of 5th grade. It felt like he was being buried alive.

If he had known how soon his life was going to change, he would have been surprised how easily horrible days like this one could suddenly become the happiest days of his life.

Roy Turner was not uncomfortable with his son's outburst. It went without saying that they would find a way through this together. "What makes you think it might happen again?"

"I just feel like such a dummy. The other kids don't even care about school. They're just waiting it out until they're old enough to quit school and work at the cotton mill. That's probably all I'll ever do too."

His dad rose and stood beside James with a warm hand on his shoulder. "With so many children and so few teachers--I can understand your problem at school, James. Makes it hard to ask questions when you don't understand. I'll tell you what, tonight, when I get home, let's go over what you study in school today. We'll work on it together."

Waiting apprehensively for his ride to school, James stood on one foot, and leaned his weight on the other against the old oak. It grew at the edge of his yard, rugged and strong, solid and straight. "It's pretty bad when you feel dumber than an old tree!" James grumbled to Fits lying at his feet. Fits tried to encourage him by licking his hand.

James hoped his ride would forget him this morning. Maybe he could simply slide around to the other side of the tree and disappear. Then maybe Mrs. Barefoot and her pile of girls would think he wasn't going, and head off to the school without him.

One thought of Mrs. Barefoot and her rattley old car with every nook and cranny stuffed with yet another of her daughters, and suddenly James could think of something almost as bad as failing at school. Her name was Betty Byrd Barefoot. The knot in his stomach flew up into his chest and almost strangled him.

He could hear them coming without even looking up. The old 1924 Model T Ford Sedan seemed to bulge with its burden of Barefoots, and above the laborious grinding of its engine, Mrs. Barefoot's screech could be distinctly heard. "Sit still there, Ella Mae. Your knees are in my way. Myrtle Jean, stop pickin' your nose. Wipe it--no, not on Irene's sleeve! Don't you have a handkerchief? Mildred, do you have an extra handkerchief? Going to school without a handkerchief? What is this world coming too? Give it to Myrtle."

Watching the car approach, James absently patted Fits on the head and muttered, "When Henry Ford said he would make a car for the multitudes--I'm sure he didn't mean they would all be in one car!"

The old car drew itself up and shuttered to a stop right in front of James as if begging for relief. The paint had long dulled on the black door that flung wide open. And there she sat: Betty Byrd Barefoot. Her dark cotton dress stretched tightly across her rolls of fat, making her look like a pile of used tires thrown in the back seat. Her blond wisps of hair had been painstakingly forced into pin curls, but any effort toward beauty was wasted. Being a growing young man, James's mother always reminded him that beauty was only skin deep. "She may be right about beauty," he spoke as if Fits had been reading his thoughts, "but looking at Betty Byrd I'd say that ugly goes all the way to the heart!" James took it for granted that the smirk on her lips must be permanent since that was the only expression he had ever seen her wear. Not seeing an inch of space in the car to squeeze himself into, he stood motionless.

"Get on in here, James—we can't sit here waitin' forever. Come on now, Betty Byrd won't bite!" Mrs. Barefoot was not one to keep waiting.

The car seemed to groan and convulse as its passengers shifted their weight to accommodate James. An image of Jonah flashed through his mind, the mouth of the whale open waiting to devour him. James turned his back as he approached the car, not wanting to see the look of triumph in Betty Byrd's eyes as he settled himself on the only spot available--her lap. Why did it always feel like she was the conquering queen and he the surrendering prisoner? He'd rather walk to school than have to pile his lanky frame onto her lap like a child. But walking was out of the question. Mrs. Barefoot was one of his mother's best friends, and refusing her gracious offer of transportation would have been like spitting in her soup pot.

"Hi, James." Betty Byrd's greeting had not an ounce of congeniality in it. Rather, it sounded more like a cat toying with its catch, laughing at its hopeless predicament. The door would not shut until Betty Byrd sucked in her breath--a futile effort to make herself smaller--and then whammed the door shut with great difficulty. James half expected to hear a belch of satisfaction as the car swallowed him whole. Fits looked as forlorn as his master, tail between his legs, his sad eyes watching the automobile disappear from sight.

James sat straight and stiff, hoping if he ignored her, she would lose interest. But, as usual, it never worked. The car barely resumed its journey when he felt her right hand reach up from behind and pinch his ear lobe. Hoping he would wince, or better yet, cry out in pain, she gradually increased the pressure. He squirmed and turned his head to free himself, but there she was on the other side slapping him on the cheek, each time a little harder, snickering when he put up his hands to block her.

"Sissy!" She spewed in his ear. "James is a sissy. James is a sissy." James' ears burned like fire, though he was not sure if it was from the heat of her labored breathing or his rising anger at the accusation. Where was Mrs. Barefoot when he needed her?

There were two rules in the Turner household, and James was sure they were both in the Bible somewhere. Never run in the churchyard and never ever hit a girl! When his dad said, "Never!" it did not mean "mostly." It was an absolute as sure as a bath on Saturday.

Of course, there were times when James tested the limit just to make sure. For instance, after Sunday morning preaching last week, he was standing idly by the back door waiting for his folks to finish their good byes. His friend, Johnny Wilson sauntered by as if he wasn't going to speak. Just as he passed and was almost out of reach, Johnny slapped him on the back and ran like a chicken on market day, yelling, "You're it!" What else could a fella do but chase him?

It utterly amazed James how long his dad's arm could grow in an instant. James was clear at the back of the churchyard when out of nowhere that arm reached out and grabbed him on the shoulder in a grip that meant, "STOP NOW!" And he knew without question, his running days were over!

James could understand running inside the church building being prohibited—but not even in the churchyard? That was hard to take. But nothing, absolutely nothing, was as hard to take as refraining from an all out punch-in-the-face—Betty Byrd Barefoot's girl face!

Unaware of James's desperate thoughts, Betty Byrd continued her torment. James's straight black hair was cropped short on top and even shorter on the sides. But Betty Byrd had no problem getting a small clump between her thumb and forefinger. With a giggle that sounded like a toad with asthma, she tugged mercilessly, until James had to lean with the motion or lose the hair.

"Stop!" he hollered exasperated, trying to wiggle free while pinned in on all sides.

As if in obedience to his command, the automobile came to an abrupt halt. But Mrs. Barefoot had more pressing matters to attend than James's comfort. In the front seat Ella Mae burst from the car just in time to lose her breakfast all over the road. James could hear it splat, and his own breakfast flopped over in his stomach deciding whether or not it would stay put.

Betty Byrd momentarily lost interest in her toy and flattened her nose against the window to watch her sister heave once again. Mrs. Barefoot's hand on the back of Ella Mae's neck looked as if she would not let her straighten up until everything in her stomach was laying at her feet.

The commotion held James's attention for only an instant. He even forgot about Betty Byrd. All he could see were the train tracks extending from both sides of the car—and the movement of an approaching train in the distance!

"Mizz Barefoot! We've got to go! Mizz Barefoot! There's a train coming!" His voice was high pitched and desperate.

Mrs. Barefoot was not to be interrupted or rushed. As far as she was concerned, she was there first and the train could wait. She wiped Ella's mouth with the same handkerchief Myrtle had used and commanded her back into the car, sputtering, "Don't know why you turn green every time we get in the car!"

By this time, James was already visualizing the certain impact. Breathing was impossible as he listened to the train whistle blasting on his right and watching Mrs. Barefoot's agonizingly slow re-entry on the left. The monstrous black locomotive was like a bullet racing toward its mark, and James felt like the bull's-eye. Mrs. Barefoot squeezed herself between the seat and the steering wheel and moseyed off the track in her own good time. James hick-upped in

fright, feeling the thunderous disapproval of the train as its target rolled slowly out of reach.

Arriving at school that day, even 5th grade seemed like a blessing!

Mordecai Ham
Chapter 3

“Mordecai Ham is coming to town!” Mr. O’Brian didn’t waste time on hellos as he entered Turner’s Grocery.

Roy Turner smiled his greeting, saying, “Mornin’ Sir, looks like it’s going to be a nice one!”

Mr. O’Brian had no interest in the weather. He knew the talk of the town was the preacher coming for revival services, and he had a lot to say on the subject. “Don’t you know, people either love him or hate him. No in between.”

Jawing at the store was as much a part of shopping as putting groceries in a bag. In fact, it was not impolite for the men folk to meet and talk with no intention of buying. Even in summer when no heat was needed, three high back chairs haphazardly took center stage around the pot bellied heat stove, while shelves of dry goods lined the perimeter of the store. Mr. O’Brian sat down heavily, placing his hat conveniently on the counter and nodded at Mr. Easly, his neighbor already seated with his feet propped up on the cold stovetop. There was seldom a need for introductions because everybody in town knew most everybody else in town.

James, helping his dad at the store, was busy pushing a broom. As Mr. O’Brian continued, James swept the floor close-by so as not to miss the news. “One thing’s for sure,” O’Brian was saying, “Mordecai Ham is no sissy evangelist. He doesn’t tiptoe into town and mingle with the church crowd. He heads straight for the biggest, toughest sinners and gives them a preachin’ that leaves no doubt in their minds, he is playin’ for keeps!”

Listening intently, Mr. Easly shifted in his seat. “Did you hear about the services he held in Kentucky?”

“Sure did. Those bootlegging moon shiners surrounded the church while Ham was preaching. They untied the horses and threw bricks through the windows, stole everything they could get their hands on, making a ruckus loud enough to wake the sleepers on the back row.”

“I don’t think there were any sleepers that night,” Mr. Easly chuckled. “I heard the church folk were all flat on the floor, too scared to peek out of the windows.”

“Not Mr. Ham,” Mr. O’Brian continued. “He strode out the front door wielding his Bible in one hand like it was a weapon and pointing his finger with his other hand right at the leader of the pack. Don’t you know, that old sinner pulled a knife from his coat and brandished it in Ham’s face like he couldn’t wait to carve out one of his eyeballs.

“But Ham never even flinched. Sized up his opponent just inches from his face, and said matter-of-factly, ‘Drop the knife, Coward! I’m going to pray for the Lord to convert you or kill you.’ It was as simple as that.”

“The man dropped the knife and ran like a rabbit from a hound dog.” Mr. Easly filled in.

“Mr. Ham went back into the church and did exactly what he said he’d do.” Mr. O’Brian paused for effect, noticing James had given up all pretense of sweeping. “He prayed for the salvation or death for the troublemakers outside.”

“So what happened?” James was leaning on the idle broom, absorbed in the story.

“Don’t you know, the next morning the man who threatened Ham with the knife was dead in his bed.”

“And that’s not all,” Mr. Easley was not to be outdone, “a few hours later, the town was shocked when an explosion at the sawmill killed three of his buddies. Imagine that! No doubt in anybody’s mind, this was judgment from the Lord!”

“You’d think that would be the end of it, but not for Mordecai.” Mr. O’Brian now seemed to be on a first name basis with the famous preacher. “Next night he gets up in the pulpit and tells folk if the stolen goods aren’t returned God might do some more weeding.”

“Did they bring the stuff back?” James absently laid the broom down and took the vacant seat.

“Don’t you know, the next evening, all of the stolen goods showed up except one saddle.”

“I can’t believe it.” James said, though he did.

“Wouldn’t that be enough to satisfy you? All but one saddle?” Mr. O’Brian did not wait for an answer. “Not Ham. He started praying right on the spot for the return of the missing saddle. And don’t you know, a man jumped up off the back pew and hollered, ‘Stop your praying! I’ll go get it directly!’”

“Jeepers Creepers!” James felt like he’d been holding his breath. “That’s incredible!”

“There’s all kinds of stories about Mr. Ham.” Mr. Easley wasn’t ready to stop yet. “I heard on one occasion Mordecai Ham tracked down an atheist. Found him hiding under a shock in a cornfield, if you can believe that.

“What are you going to do with me?” Mr. Easley made his voice sound like the trembling man speaking to Mr. Ham.

“Just like it was common logic, Mr. Ham retorted,” (and Mr. Easley said this in a deep commanding voice), “I’m going to ask God to kill you. That shouldn’t bother you, because according to you there’s no God anyway!” Even Roy Turner laughed at that.

Mr. Easley continued, “Mr. Ham thought a minute--still holding the man by the scruff of the neck like he was an errant school boy. Then he said,” (in the exaggerated Mr. Ham voice), “BUT if He does exist, you deserve to die because you are teaching your children and grandchildren to be atheists too!”

“You’ve got to respect a man like that.” Roy thought out loud.

“I think this man did. There on the spot, he fell down on his knees pleading for mercy.” This time nobody was laughing.

Mr. O’Brian picked up the story at the end. “‘Very well,’ said Ham, ‘then I will ask God to save you.’ Don’t you know, by the end of the revival, this man not only got saved but 40 others of his family followed his example!”

James had to agree with his dad, a person had to respect a man like Mordecai Ham. No pussyfooting around in what he believed. But it made James a little nervous, thinking of being in the presence of someone who could, and quite often would, call down God's wrath. Just as a precaution, James decided when the Ham revival services commenced he would not be sitting on the front row!

And so it was, James found himself on the back pew, first seat off the aisle on the left side—just in case he needed to make a quick exit. The ladies in the Temperance League filled the front pews, thrilled to be close to one of their strongest advocates. His mother and dad stood at the door to welcome many of their neighbors who had come at their request. James half expected to see an ambulance pull up, having heard it was common for emergency services to be needed during Ham revival meetings.

When Mr. Mordecai Ham finally appeared behind the pulpit James was surprised. He was tall and broad, well-dressed in a smart gray suit, looking more like a politician rather than a fiery preacher. His voice was slightly high pitched and almost monotone, nothing that would command attention, much less obedience. Yet the eyes behind his rimless glasses were piercing. They seemed to strip James bare at the heart and expose him for all to see.

"I'm a hog-jowl and turnip green preacher," Mordecai Ham began, "but I am here with a message from God to you. Maybe some of you think I am hard on you halfway Christians, lambasting you without respect. The problem is, you can't make up your mind whether you're in or out—and you're blocking the door for the sinner behind you. So make up your mind, and get out of the way. Come in if you're coming or go out if you're not. Don't stand there blocking the door for the next person wanting to come in."

James squirmed in his seat wanting to disappear. Mr. Ham seemed to know him from front to back, and there was nowhere to hide. James was restless, his mind fighting to justify himself. "Everybody knows I'm a good fella--from a good family. Mother and Dad are upstanding Christian folk—everybody looks up to them. They're always ready to help.

"How good do you have to be—to get into heaven?" Mr. Ham's question seemed like a hammer on James's thoughts, and he was convinced this man could read his mind.

"You can NEVER be good enough to ever clear the doorway." The word 'never' seemed to echo hopelessly in James's mind.

Every time Mordecai Ham pointed his finger, it was pointed directly at him. His eyes were glaring right at James when he leaned over the pulpit and said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. If the Bible says it, that's the way it is!"

James knew there was no more pretending. Being a good person, the son of God-fearing parents was only enough to keep him blocking the doorway—keeping others from entering. All he could think of was Johnny Wilson. What if

he was blocking his best friend? That would be as bad as missing heaven himself!

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Ham was relentless, not leaving any crack for a self-righteous man to squeeze through.

And James knew he was right. He could never be good enough to get into heaven. Only Jesus’ death on the cross could pay the penalty for his sin, and accepting that gift was the only hope he had of finding forgiveness.

The piano began to play and the congregation sang.

“Saved! I’m saved through Christ, my all in all;
Saved! I’m saved, whatever may befall;
He died upon the cross for me,
He bore the awful penalty.
And now I’m saved eternally,
I’m saved! Saved! Saved!”

Mr. Ham boldly instructed the ‘good folk’, the halfway Christians, to come and kneel at the altar, and make the words of the song true in their hearts. James knew in the deepest part of his heart, Mr. Ham was right. He knew what he needed to do--but his feet stuck to the floor like they had a stubborn will of their own. His fear of going forward was even greater than the fear of going to hell.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed movement. Across the aisle, his dad stepped into view. Offering his arm to his wife, they proceeded to walk up to the altar together. Why in the world were they going forward? There must be someone at the altar that needed their counsel. To James’s surprise, they knelt at the altar and prayed while the tears flowed down their cheeks without embarrassment.

James was miserable all the way home. Even having the whole rumble seat to himself was too close quartered for him, and he felt almost as squished as he did when riding with the Barefoots. His Sunday-go-to-meetin’ clothes were too tight, his knickers binding at his knees, his tie choking his throat. He could not meet his parent’s eyes for fear of seeing the disappointment they must be feeling. Arriving home, he mumbled his good night and went to bed.

Long after the house was dark, James lay wide-awake. At first both arms were folded under his head, then he curled up on his left side. Soon he was turning to his right side and then flat on his back again. The cycle seemed to repeat itself endlessly, in a hopeless effort to get comfortable. By morning his bedclothes were sprawled on the floor in as much of a mess as his thoughts. He appeared for breakfast tired and tussled and ready to surrender.

Sally had the biscuits already on the table, and the steam rose from the dish as if inviting the family to come eat. But not even the smell of sausage gravy could distract James from his weighty problem. James was impatient as his father said the blessing. “This is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.”

James didn't even wait until their heads were raised.

"I wanted to go to the altar last night. I really did. But I was so scared--in front of all those people!"

"I know just how you felt," his dad understood.

"You and Mother have been working at church and helping folks all my life. Surely he wasn't talking to you. If you're not good enough, I know I don't have a chance!"

"How good do you have to be to make it in to heaven?" His dad quietly quoted Mr. Ham's profound question.

"Absolutely perfect." James whispered softly.

"We realized last night that all the good things we do are just like dirty, smelly rags next to God's perfection. Only Jesus can make us blameless."

"I wish I had gone forward too. What am I going to do?" James wailed, feeling like his chance was missed.

Sally reached for his hand and smiled gently, "I don't remember a verse in the Bible that says you can only be saved at the altar."

Relief showed in James's face. Looking at his dad, he asked, "Would you help me, Dad?"

That morning, James took Mr. Ham's advice and cleared the doorway to Heaven, making room for others to come in.

The Strike Chapter 4

It was dark outside when someone rapped at the door. James and his father were bent intently over an arithmetic book with a pencil and paper at hand. Sally was drying a supper plate with a dishtowel. She stopped in mid-motion and waited silently for Roy to answer the door. Roy stood as if he had expected the visitor, though he did not look pleased. James thought his parents' behavior odd; he had never known a visitor that was not welcomed in their home.

The caller pulled Roy out into the shadows of the porch and spoke briefly in undertones. Not waiting for a response, he disappeared back into the night. Roy did not move, his shoulders stooped and head down. Neither James nor his mother spoke as they waited.

Roy stepped slowly back in the house as if the weight on his shoulders made it difficult to walk, and closed the door securely before turning to his family. "Talks are over with no resolutions. The mill strikes on Monday."

He sat down at the kitchen table next to James and motioned for Sally to join them. "I think we should pray together right now. Things could get ugly."

Three heads bowed and Roy began to talk to God just like He was the fourth one at the table. "Lord, You know all about this situation. This depression has slowed the cotton business down to half what it was. The mill's cutting wages again and the workers are already struggling to put food on the table. They're in a bad spot, living in company housing with no place of their own. Doesn't give them much leverage. And I'm not sure what to make of these union folks coming into town. Maybe they have the workers' good in mind, but seems to me they are agitating a pot all set to boil.

"I don't know what the answer is, Lord, so I'm not even going to try to tell You what to do. But thank You for listening, for caring, and for being involved. We are trusting You to give direction. Amen."

James began firing questions before his dad even lifted his head. "What's going to happen to us, Dad? Does that mean you are going to close the store? How're we going to pay our bills if the people don't have money to buy anything? Can we eat the food at the store?" James couldn't stop the anxious thoughts that marched around his heart in ever tightening circles. How could his dad pray for everybody else and not even worry about his own family? How could he just pray and then calmly go about his business? James was not sure if he was proud of his dad or angry with him.

Roy looked at Sally and she knew a decision had been made. She nodded her approval, even though not a word had passed between them. "James," his dad began, "your mother and I have decided to keep the store open. These folks are going to need food. Don't worry. In a couple of weeks this will be over and folks will make it up to us. Just you wait and see."

But he was wrong. A month later, two mill workers were badly beaten attempting to cross the picket line.

Sweet Johnny Wilson. That was James's mother's name for his best friend. James never told him so because it would have humiliated any boy over the age of three! But she was right. He was gentle and thoughtful and loyal. He and James were as close as brothers. The best part of the day was when the boys finished their chores and met in the neighbor's cow pasture between their homes.

"Over here, Johnny!" James motioned for him to join him under the apple tree. The cows were grazing nearby hoping to find a stray fallen apple left over from the summer harvest. But the farmer had been diligent not to leave even one apple to taint his herd's milk. Giving up the search, two of the cows poked near the boys, nosing in on their conversation. As if offended by their eavesdropping, Fits ran at them barking fiercely, then stopped abruptly as they scattered, seeming to snicker at their flight.

Without warning, Johnny emptied the contents of a paper bag onto James's lap. "Look what I found!" James jumped trying to catch an assortment of glass medicine bottles and tin cans as they fell, clinking and clattering while rolling every which way onto the ground.

"What is this?" He laughed. "Looks like you raided the drug store!"

"Naw," Johnny smiled as he hung his head and stooped to sit beside his friend. "I just found these in Mr. Crowder's trash heap. Nothing wrong with taking somebody's trash, is there?" He looked worried.

James picked up each bottle to inspect the contents as if taking inventory. Three Bayer Aspirins, 5 Vicks cough drops all stuck together, several broken sulfa tablets, a tin can of Boraxo powdered hand soap that had clumped together with moisture, a near empty bottle of Epson salts, and a whole half a bottle of cod liver oil.

"Well, I can sure understand why he's throwing the cod liver oil away! That tastes bad enough to bring a fella back from the dead much less cure what ails him! But how come he dumped these other things?"

Johnny shrugged. "Don't rightly know, but I found all this on the top of the pile. I thought maybe it could be the start of that drug store you were talking about."

Putting food on the table had become a pressing problem for both boys. James felt like his appetite was escalating as the family's food supply was dwindling. Just that morning his mother had shook her head in amazement at the portion on his plate saying, "I declare, Son, you must be filling a hollow leg!" She laughed when she said it, but James knew she was worried about him going hungry. This drug store idea was just the ticket.

"You're right!" James leapt to his feet in excitement.

"I think we're in business!" Johnny echoed his agreement, and they shook hands like partners sealing a business contract.

"Let's get the chicken house cleaned out, and then we'll see what else we can find to stock the shelves." James led the way.

The chicken house had long been empty, and the boys had turned it into a clubhouse. Opening a neighborhood drug store was another in a long line of business ideas they worked on together. They had set up a library where membership required a nickel, and late fees were a penny a day. But books to lend were hard to come by, and buddies with a nickel even harder.

Next came the beverage store. Circulating the neighborhood, they scrounged up empty 4oz glass catsup bottles. It didn't take long to wash the bottles—sometimes just a little spit shine and elbow grease was all they needed. Filling the bottles with Kool-Aid and screwing on the caps was the easy part. Impatiently, they waited for customers on the warm fall day. By late afternoon, they realized they had drunk more than they had sold, and gave it up—after downing the rest of their merchandise.

These were experienced entrepreneurs that enthusiastically set to work with two brooms, cleaning up the abandoned chicken house. Both boys coughed and sputtered as the dust flew in their faces. From outside it looked like the place was on fire—dust billowing out of the windows and through the cracks in the wood like smoke in a house ablaze. A dirty drug store simply would not do.

James was disappointed when he heard his mother ring the dinner bell outside the back door. He knew it wasn't time for supper, so she must have an errand for him to run. Like it or not, he and Johnny dropped what they were doing and ran for the house.

His mother stood in the doorway with a pot of soup in hand. "Boys, run this Brunswick Stew over yonder to Widow Vaiden's house. Tell her this is to remind her that we're thinking about her and her children tonight."

James and Johnny darted through the woods anxious to finish their errand and get back to their business.

"Your folks're always doing things for other folks." Johnny spoke while James took a turn carrying the pot. "How come, you think?"

His question took James by surprise. What a great chance to tell Johnny it was because they wanted to love people like Christ had loved them. He wanted to say that Jesus had died on the cross for Johnny's sin too. But James's thoughts got all jumbled up as he wondered how to say what he was thinking. Every time he started to answer, the words seemed to get all tangled and confused and stuck in his throat. Why was he scared to tell Johnny what was so important? He could feel Johnny's eyes on him, and finally he just shrugged, saying, "They just like folks, I reckon."

Johnny seemed satisfied, but James's heart sank. Delivering supper to the very thankful Vaiden family did not bring James any satisfaction. He was a coward and he knew it.

The Dan River Mill Chapter 5

The Great Depression made its entrance on the heels of the stock market crash, on Black Tuesday, October 10, 1929. But it was almost 3 years later before the small mill community of Schoolfield in Danville, VA felt the effects. In the end, it wasn't really the depression that brought the population of Schoolfield to their knees, but a simple choice made over thirty years earlier by their parents.

At first it seemed like a win-win situation. Business at the Dan River Mill was booming in the early 1900's being the largest textile industry in the South. When the mill offered to provide affordable housing for their workers in exchange for lower wages, it sounded like a mutual benefit. The Civil War had ended slavery, and the southern farmers were struggling to farm without the free slave labor. Many of the early employees at the mill were farmers driven from their land because of insurmountable debt. A dry bed and a sure paycheck seemed like a pretty good deal in exchange for lower wages from one of the fastest growing businesses in the nation. The mill village of Schoolfield was born.

Whole families came and worked in the mill, inviting their relatives to come and do the same. It was not unusual for single dwellings to house multiple families. Within a decade there were 400 mill homes and more than 5,000 people who lived in them.

Soon Schoolfield had its own post office, police department, hotel, hospital, school, and other businesses. It seemed like the mill owned everything. Eventually, it was as if they owned the people themselves.

By the time the stock market went belly up, ushering in the Great Depression, most of the mill workers were second generation, and well entrenched in their dependency on the mill.

Like an ugly giant, the Great Depression put its massive fingers around the throat of the textile industry and began its stranglehold. The cotton textile market slowly diminished. Power outages were frequent, making production sporadic. The effects, at first unnoticeable, soon became an avalanche of problems. Suddenly the mill workers found themselves at the mercy of a downsizing business, a business that virtually owned their lives. Further agitating the unrest were the unions seeking to gain a footing in the mill, threatening management and stirring up the fiery embers of discontent among the common workers.

Turner's Grocery was not far from Schoolfield. Roy's decision to keep the store open is said to have been the difference between life and starvation for many of the mill families during the strike. The company stores chose to close rather than deal with the humane and moral issue of starving customers who had no money for food. Besides, closing the stores was to their benefit, forcing the workers to settle for less in the negotiations.

How does a storekeeper pay his bills if he gives his merchandise away for nothing? Roy mulled this question over in his mind on his way to and from the store each day. Each day, the answer was needed a little more desperately.

“Hey Roy, did you hear the news?” Mr. Walker seemed encouraged as he entered the store. “They say the strike is almost settled. I think by this time next week I’ll be back to work.” He leaned on the counter and lowered his voice, “By the way, do you think I could have a little more credit? You know I’m good for it.”

Roy nodded and smiled. By now he knew the routine. Folks simply had to believe the strike would be over soon because the alternative was unthinkable. They were destitute with nowhere else to turn. Believing they would soon be back to work gave them hope, and maybe a little feeling of respect when they had to ask for more credit. Only then could they ask for help, believing they would very soon repay their debt and not be beholding to anyone. Roy needed to believe it would be over soon too. His bills were standing higher than the credit slips.

“Yes, I know you are a man of your word, Mr. Walker. I’d be happy to get what you need. You’re right, this strike can’t go on forever.” With that he handed over the supplies and said, “Good day.”

At first, he had kept an itemized list of what each person owed. Soon the lists grew too long, and he knew there was no hope of repayment. Was it right for a man not to pay his own bills because he had given what he had to someone else? He was in so deep he wasn’t sure how he would ever get out.

Roy grew quiet at the supper table at night. James knew things were getting bad, not by what his folks said, but by what they didn’t say.

Long after the lights were out, Roy and Sally lay in bed discussing events of the day. James’s room had always been right next to theirs, and he had long been accustomed to drifting off to sleep at night to the murmur of their voices. Their words were not distinct, but he could tell by the tone, which one was speaking: the deepness of his dad’s bass contrasted by his mother’s soothing soprano was more comforting than a lullaby. Their conversations wafted through the house like a peaceful blessing at the end of the day.

Maybe it was the unrest and violence escalating around him, or maybe James was growing up. Either way, he began to realize his parents’ nightly conversations were conducted without him in an effort to spare him the worry of a world turned upside down.

For years James had listened to the their voices with no need to understand their words. Now he had to know.

Sliding off of his bed, it creaked as if trying to squeal on him for wanting to eavesdrop. He crouched on the floor and waited to be sure he wouldn’t be discovered. Slowly, inch-by-inch, he slid along the polished hard wood floor until he was at the door. He leaned against the wall by the door of his room and heard them clearly, though he could not see them.

His dad was speaking, his voice heavy with concern. “It’s getting worse instead of better. I hate to say it, Mizz Turner, but I reckon we are in over our heads.”

Sally tried to encourage him, saying, "Our problems seem awful small compared to so many others, Roy. Mrs. Wilson told me today her husband's life was threatened. He's the production manager, and vowed he'd never let the union step foot in the mill."

"You know, Judge Tompkins' house was set on fire last week. Rumor has it some of the union boys didn't like the way he was ruling against the workers."

"Don't know which way is up when we have so many friends on both sides of the argument." James was touched by the sadness in Sally's voice.

"People are in bad straits, Sally. The mill village has deteriorated into an over populated slum. When I was there the other day visiting with Ben--you wouldn't believe the slop holes developing. Those outhouses were not made for so many people."

"Roy, these folk can't work for nothing. They're destitute."

"Well, Mizz Turner, I'm not sure where we go from here." His father's voice was tired, the kind of tired that sleep wouldn't fix. "It's time to pay our bills, and there's nothing but crackers in the cracker jar. As of tomorrow Turner's Grocery is closed."

James shivered as he perched on the floor--and it had nothing to do with the cold stealing through his pajamas. His mind kept trying to make sense of it all. His dad always had the answer. He always knew what to do. James felt like he was adding up 2 plus 2 and getting 5 when he knew the answer was always 4. It just couldn't be. But it was.

Roy was praying together with his wife as James crawled stiffly back to bed. James didn't even care if the bed creaked. He hunkered under the covers and curled up in a knot, trying to imagine how they would survive.

Next morning, it was breakfast as usual. Sally filled their bowls with hot oatmeal and placed the molasses in the middle of the table before sitting down. They joined hands while Roy gave the usual blessing. "This is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it. Amen"

No sooner had they begun to eat, than Roy turned his attention to James. As if addressing an equal, Roy said, "James, I am not going to the store today. We've got some bills that need paying before we can open the store again."

"What are you going to do, Dad?" James tried not to let the fear he felt show in his voice.

"I'll just go into Schoolfield and help Ben Murphy do some visiting. Lot of folks needin' help right now. Maybe you could meet me after school at Widow Vaiden's, and we'll get some wood cut for her."

"That's not what I meant, Dad. I meant, how are we going to pay our bills? What happens if we don't?"

Sally's mouth was set in determination. "James," she said, "God brought manna right out of heaven for the children of Israel to eat. I don't think He's wringing His hands about our problems right now. Eat your oatmeal, Son, and don't worry. He'll take care of us too." As far as Sally was concerned, there was no two ways about it.

It wasn't that James didn't believe God could send manna—or money to pay bills, for that matter, he just wasn't sure that He would. What God could do and what God would do often seemed like two very different things to James.

Neither James nor his folks knew that closing the store was only the beginning of their lives changing forever.

A Most Embarrassing Moment
Chapter 6

James's mother's most embarrassing moment was one morning late in October. Sally was busy out in the garden harvesting the black-eyed peas. The frost had held off nicely, making it a good double crop. The dried up pods were dark brown and crackled as she pulled them from the lifeless vines.

The late frost had been good for the peas, though it was unfortunate that it had also extended the life of the bees. Ordinarily Sally would have been happy to see the bees. They went about their business in the garden pollinating and fertilizing plants without any special recognition. But their job was done for the season and they seemed to be idle, not knowing what to do with themselves; waiting for the killer frost to put them out of their misery. Whatever the reason, they were everywhere.

Sally picked a few peas, then stopped to swing her arms wildly, trying to discourage their obsession with her long dark hair that she had pinned up in a bun. The bees were making the harvesting much too complicated, and she did not have time for the nonsense. The peas needed to be shelled and bagged. There were turnips and sweet potatoes to be harvested, and a hole dug to store them in through the winter. She knew Roy had every intention of helping, but if she could get it done, it would just save him that much time. And then there was that dress she needed to finish making over for her friend who needed it worse than she did.

"Land sakes alive!" She ranted as she batted at another bee with her hand. Frustrated beyond measure, Sally glanced quickly around making sure she was alone. The garden, tucked in the backyard with no neighbors in sight, gave her the solitude she needed. With one quick motion, she pulled the bottom skirt of her dress up over her head and pulled it tightly under her chin like a bonnet, leaving just enough of an opening to peer through. Her homemade white cotton petticoat hung down mid-calf. Having out-smarted the pesky bees, she finally began making progress with her pea picking.

Nobody would have ever known--except Roy returned from Schoolfield with Ben Murphy a little earlier than expected. Bent over and totally absorbed in her work, Sally did not notice the men until they stood chuckling at the edge of the garden. She startled to attention when she heard Roy say, "Ben—I'll bet you're not familiar with this modern technique of harvesting black eyed peas!"

Sally didn't know whether to jerk her dress down and pretend it had never happened or go ahead and finish covering her face in embarrassment!

If Roy and Sally thought that closing the store was going to end the steady stream of needy customers, they were very wrong. If anything, it increased. Only now folks came under the cover of dark, maybe too humbled to make their request in the daylight. The hope of settling the dispute quickly and ending the

strike died when the CLOSED sign hung on the front door of Turner's Grocery. For the first time since going into the retail business, Roy locked the door to the store. The simple act of turning the key to secure the door was another indication of changing times.

Nothing more was said at home about the store closing, and if James didn't know any better, he would have thought it was still open. His mother and dad went about their business each day as if nothing had changed. Only now his dad spent most of his time working together with Mr. Murphy helping folks down at the mill village. James knew that wasn't a paying job—but it wasn't like there was a paying job to be had anyway. And he was proud of the way folks looked to his dad when they had problems.

After school James and his father worked hard chopping wood for Widow Vaiden. They didn't need to talk much. Once, as they worked, James asked his dad, "Are we poor?"

Roy chuckled at the question and stopped swinging the axe for a moment. With a grin on his face he said, "As long as we've got something to give somebody else, I'd have to say we're rich!"

They worked side-by-side, felling the trees, cutting them the length of the woodstove, and splitting them a little smaller than usual to make it easier for Mrs. Vaiden to feed the fire.

Her little ones helped all they could—her oldest, Billy, was almost 6. He stacked the wood James and his dad split outside the kitchen door while two younger boys toddled into the house with one piece at a time for their mother to use for heating and cooking. Billy's twin sister, Betsy, brought out cold water for them, and James recognized her dress as a makeover of his mother's.

It seemed to James that there were children everywhere, and he could not imagine what it would be like to have that many brothers and sisters. "Guess that'll never happen at my house," he thought as he swung the axe again. His mother had almost died giving birth to him. The doctor's had to operate to save her life, cutting into her stomach to bring him out: a very dangerous and risky emergency surgery. James blushed, wondering if he should even be thinking about these things. The details were sketchy because, of course, he was too young to remember, and talk about having babies was not polite. James just knew his mother would never have another baby. It was a matter of life and death. James contented himself with the antics of the Vaiden youngsters, and felt like an adult as he worked.

Between school and helping his dad, James kept busy during the day. It was easy in the light of day to put the troubles aside. But as the shadows grew tall, and the sun slid behind the hills, James could feel the cold knot return to his stomach. When the night became blacker than the cinders dumped as blacktop on the mill village road, the knocks began.

James could tell his dad was worried. But each caller was welcomed as if they had been invited, and no one left empty handed. Only when their guests departed did James see the weight of concern return to his parents' faces. He knew the shelves at the store were long since empty, and the ones in their pantry were rapidly dwindling to nothing.

James noticed things around the house beginning to disappear. The rocking chair, the quilt his mother just finished making, his dad's pocket watch. It went without saying, some had gone to pay bills and others to fill a need for someone else.

Of all the people that came, Ben Murphy was his favorite. Maybe it was because he didn't come for himself, but always for someone worse off than he. Ben was a tall, husky man, standing a full head taller than Roy. His voice rumbled like thunder when he spoke, making James feel like his presence filled their whole house. Ben seemed all thumbs in their little bungalow, hemmed in and awkward. But put him outside with a couple of kids and a fishing line, and he was completely at home. Mr. Murphy was a magnet for anyone in trouble. His dark brown eyes softened at another's pain, and his big square hands were strong and willing to help lift another man's load.

Mr. Murphy and Roy were two peas in a pod, like brothers. James knew between the two of them, they'd find a way to help anybody, even if they ended up in the poor house to do it! And James decided that would be just fine. As long as he could be with his dad, everything would be okay.

That's when the bottom dropped out.

The Abandoned Rock Quarry Chapter 7

“James!” his mother hollered as she came out of the front door. “I declare, I wish we’d brought the dinner bell from home!” She muttered under her breath. “Can’t find that boy without sounding like a hillbilly to the whole neighborhood!” Sally glanced at the other shacks lined up next to hers, all equally drab and unpainted, drooping sadly as if sympathizing with the misplaced families seeking refuge in them. Sally straightened her shoulders, determined to make the best of a bad situation. Walking to the back of what was now her home to check the laundry drying on the line, she hollered again. “James! Where are you?”

Life had changed abruptly, and Sally knew it was hardest for James. When the bills came due, no manna had appeared--just as James had feared. The Turner house, grocery store, and most of their belongings were auctioned off, selling for barely enough to settle the debt against them. Ben Murphy pleaded with the Turners to share his home, but knowing there was not room, they would not hear of it. With a heavy heart, Ben helped them move their meager belongings into a one room shanty at a nearby abandoned rock quarry. Roy Turner and his family were the ones Ben most wanted to help—and there was nothing left to give.

Rounding the back corner of the shack, Sally was surprised to see James leaning against the back wall of their “new” home. His hands firmly clutched the top of a pair of homemade stilts, and his feet were a good three feet off the ground.

Seeing his mother, James grinned proudly. “Look. I made ‘em myself!” He was beaming as if he had created the finest pair of stilts a boy could own. “Can you believe it?”

Sally surveyed his handiwork warily. The old lumber was warped and grey with age, but strong enough. He had nailed crosspieces that precariously made a rest for his feet. Fits had no doubts about his master’s brilliance and danced proudly around him.

“I’ve been practicing, Mother. Watch.”

To get his balance, James leaned his upper body forward and pushed away from the building with his hind end. His first step or two were more like baby steps as he swayed to keep his balance. With a quick side-glance, he checked to make sure his mother was appropriately impressed.

Fits could not contain himself any longer. As if to cheer his master on, the dog began weaving in between the legs of the stilts in figure eights and barking praise to his master high above him. Already unsteady, James lost all pretense of control. In a desperate effort to regain his balance, he leaned way forward to counter a stride too wide, then backed up two or three quick steps to compensate for over reaching, only to realize he had over stepped again. Instead of James walking the stilts, it looked like the stilts were walking him. Feeling like an arrow flung against its will from the bow, James streaked across the rocky back yard, his legs rushing frantically to catch up with his body.

In a flash, his mother knew exactly what was going to happen, but there was nothing she could do to stop it. Dismayed, she watched as he crashed broadside into the clothesline heavy with the morning wash. Already burdened with its wet load, the line drew taut against his weight. And then it simply snapped, and let him fall unceremoniously to the ground, The soggy sheets and towels parted for him like the red sea, dragging across the dirt as they held tightly to the broken line.

“James Dixon Turner! I declare in my time...!” His mother was fit to be tied and showed him no mercy as she untangled him from the mess of soiled laundry. Fits did not dally to take the blame, but scuttled out of sight with his tail between his legs.

James knew better than to chuckle as he picked himself up. And it went without saying his afternoon would be taken up hauling water from the community pump to rewash the dirty clothes. But he felt good—like he was a real boy--not a sissy one. Shoot! Building stilts and learning to use them, even smashing through clotheslines, was just what a boy was supposed to do. There were some things a boy could not expect a mother to understand!

The afternoon was over by the time James was done with taking care of the mess he had made. As the day drew to a close, he and his mother waited to see whom Roy would bring home for supper. Most nights they could count on somebody. Sometimes it was a hungry family from the mill village, other times just a stranger passing through town looking for a meal, or a bed for the night, or better yet, a job.

Sure enough, Roy had a new friend in tow when he came home. James could hear them talking and laughing as they approached. His dad burst into the shack with a big grin, hung his hat on the nail beside the door and announced their guest. “Joe Dunkin, this is my wife, Mizz Turner—and my favorite son, James. Good thing he’s my only son—cause the others would sure be jealous!”

The man took his hat off and held it awkwardly in both hands. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am.” His shy smile included both Sally and James. “I’m grateful to you.” His gaze surveyed the room in an instant: two beds and a kitchen table took up nearly all of the floor space save a corner for the cook stove which also served as a pitiful heat source.

Roy winked at his wife saying, “Joe, you’ll see Mizz Turner can take a nickel’s worth of liver and feed a crowd all the gravy and biscuits they can eat!” He was obviously proud of her. Turning back to their guest, Roy said warmly, “We’re glad to have you with us tonight, Joe. Come on over here to the stove and get some of the chill off. We’ll get started on that wood out back in a minute.”

The men kept their coats on while they warmed their hands briefly then headed out of the door again. “Let us know when supper’s ready, Mizz Turner, and we’ll be in directly.”

James and Sally both knew about the wood in the back yard, for Joe was not the first to help with this job. Like others before, Roy would show Joe the woodpile and say, “I’m much obliged for your help here. This wood needs to be moved over closer to the door so Sally won’t have to work so hard getting it into

the house.” Or, if the woodpile was close to the door, he’d say, “I need this pile of wood moved under the eaves here so it doesn’t get wet in the rain.” It didn’t really matter where the pile of wood was; it was the moving of it that gave his guest some respectability. A man reduced to begging had difficulty respecting himself, but there was no shame if he worked for his meal. Roy and his guest would work together until supper was ready, and then eat as mutual friends, equals.

Amazing things happened around the supper table. More than once James heard his father say, “When a man puts his feet under my table, we can talk about most anything.” And James saw it happen over and over again. Stories poured out of lost jobs, hungry children, broken families. Sometimes Roy just listened and encouraged. Other times he had to disagree with choices made or roads taken. Always he would pray with his guest, pointing them to a loving Savior. No one left without hope.

That night Joe sat in James’s chair by the stove, and James used the foot of his bed as a seat at the supper table. Roy’s gentle interest in Joe opened the floodgates. “I’m headed south,” Joe began, “Heard tell there’s work down there. Lost my boy last month.” He said looking at James. “Lock jaw. No money for a doctor. The wife just had to blame somebody, I reckon. Maybe if I’d worked harder, maybe if I had a little more schooling, I wouldn’t have lost my job. Never thought things could get this bad.”

James let his mind wonder as the adults talked. Things were bad—so bad he didn’t know if life could ever be the same again. Funny how everything could be different—yet nothing really changed. He still woke for school in the morning to his mother’s call. His dad still gave the same blessing at breakfast: “This is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.” Betty Byrd still tormented him on the ride to school, 5th grade still seemed impossible, and he still couldn’t tell Johnny Wilson the things about the Lord he most wanted him to know. But for all its sameness, life was very different.

James drifted off to sleep that night hearing the steady drip, drip of water as it seeped through the leaky roof and landed in a metal dishpan sitting on the foot of his bed. All of a sudden it didn’t seem so bad—losing what seemed like everything. His worst fear had happened, and they were still okay.

James decided the depression’s real threat was not making people poor, but breaking up the families. He went to sleep without a worry, confident nothing would ever separate his family—not as long as his dad was around.

Beans Again!
Chapter 8

“How can you say God’s gonna take care of us, Dad? That’s what you said ‘fore we lost the store—and look where it got us!” James could almost match his dad stride for stride as they headed for the church. Preacher Griffin had several churches on his circuit and only came once a month for preaching services. The other Sundays were just Sunday School. Roy being the superintendent carried the bulk of responsibility while the pastor was absent.

“What’s the matter with you, Son. You blind or something?” Roy grabbed James in a headlock and ruffled his hair playfully.

James pulled free laughing and jumped on his dad’s back, wrapping his arms around his father’s neck. Roy took off in full gallop, with James hanging on for dear life. Approaching the churchyard, his father slowed and let James slide to his feet. “Whew, Son. We’ve got this all wrong. Next time I’m gonna be the one riding you!” His father was out of breath.

“Come on, Dad. I’m serious. How can you still trust God when He let us down?”

“What makes you think He let us down?”

“Aw shucks, Dad!” James was exasperated. “Are you telling me you like freezing every night over at the rock quarry? That’s not home. That’ll never be home!”

Roy opened the front door of the small country church, pure white against the backdrop of the dark woods behind it. “Round up some kindling out back, James, and we’ll get the fire going before folks get here.”

James knelt beside his dad in front of the wood stove with the twigs and bark he had gathered. They watched without talking as the flames caught to the main logs, the moisture in the wood making the fire crackle and pop. Then Roy spoke thoughtfully.

“Guess it all depends how you look at it, James. Doesn’t seem like an accident to me we got enough from the auction to pay off our bills.”

“Every morning when you give the blessing, Dad--I just don’t see a thing to be glad about these days!”

“Well then, lets think a minute. It’s a blessing going to sleep at night knowing we don’t owe anybody anything. You, your mother, and I are together under one roof. And we still have food to share with others—even if it is only beans. The way I see it, Son, life doesn’t get much better than that.”

Still on his knees, James dug his hands in his pockets stubbornly and glared at the fire. It just wasn’t enough. Inside he wanted to go home, and wanted home to be like it always was.

“James,” his dad seemed hesitant, “no matter what--we don’t have to be afraid. Things could get a lot worse before we’re done. But God’s in charge of each day of our lives, and if we choose to ‘rejoice and be glad’ regardless of what is going on around us, we will get a taste of God that’s better than all the good times life can offer.”

“What do you mean, ‘...things could get worse’? Afraid of what?”

Roy shut the door on the wood stove, but made no effort to stand. James watched his father’s face steadily.

Without looking up, Roy said, “Your mother is going to have a baby.”

James felt like his father had punched him in the stomach. How could this be? The doctor said she should NEVER have another baby. Life without his mother would be impossible. Suddenly James felt colder than he’d ever felt at the rock quarry. It was a cold that froze him from the inside out, and made him shiver as if he were lost outside in a blizzard.

“Dad--she can’t! Isn’t there something we can do?”

Still kneeling beside James, Roy put both arms around his son as if trying to protect him. In a voice that sounded suddenly old, Roy said slowly and deliberately. “We are going to trust the Lord, and we’re going to stay close to mother and make sure she doesn’t over-do.”

“How long do we have? When does the baby come?”

“Three months.” It sounded like a death sentence.

“Beans again! I am so sick and tired of beans....!” James caught his mother’s eye and knew she did not approve of his complaining. Backing down a little, he said, “I’m sorry, Mother, but we’ve already had more beans than a fella should have to stomach in a life time—and without a lick of catsup!”

Sally turned her attention to the pot heating on the stove, and began stirring its contents with a long wooden spoon. “Better to kill sorry people than to waste good food! You don’t want supper? You can get right to splitting wood out back. We’ll need more by morning.”

James hung his head as he picked up the axe and headed out back to begin his chore. The only thing worse than beans for supper was no supper at all. But the nagging thought in the back of his head bothered him even more. When would he ever learn to be like his dad?

Rumor had it the National Guard was called up to settle the strike and put the mill folks back to work, but no one knew for sure until the trucks carrying uniformed soldiers rolled into town. It was like turning the fire hose on full and pointing it directly at a run away camp fire; nothing but a puff of smoke to show what had once been a serious threat. Almost immediately, the violence stopped, the mill was willing to negotiate, and the people in the picket line showed up for work.

It seemed like a miracle when Roy came home with the news he had landed a job at Gardner’s Auto Sales selling Dodge and Plymouths. Rejoicing and being glad wasn’t so hard that night—even if it was still beans for supper.

But not a one of the Turners was prepared for what happened next. It was not unusual for Ben Murphy to show up at the front door all hours of the day or

night. But this particular Saturday afternoon, he wouldn't come in. He knocked on the door like company, and peeked his head in to see Roy and James pouring over an arithmetic book. "Come on out here, Roy," he beckoned from the door with a twinkle in his eyes, "and bring Sally and James with you." Without any further information, he ducked back outside and waited for them to follow.

To their surprise, they stepped out of their dilapidated shelter to discover the yard was filled with friends and neighbors.

Mr. Walker stepped forward as spokesman and held out his hand to shake Roy's hand vigorously. "You gave me food even when you knew I couldn't pay you back; me and everybody else standing here. We figured first things first—it's time to pay our debts.

"We came here today to let you know, we are going to build you a new house starting directly. Mr. Murphy donated a part of his lot to put the house on—so you'll have to take it up with him if you don't like your neighbors." Everyone chuckled at the thought of Roy and Ben not getting along. "We're all chipping in for supplies and working together—we figure we can have you moved in ready for the new arrival to your family. Won't be a mansion—just two rooms and an outhouse—but it'll be yours. We just want to say thanks."

The Turners stood speechless, arm in arm, with Sally in the middle. James thought he saw a tear in his mother's eye and realized it was the first tear he'd seen her cry since they had moved into the shanty.

A New Home Chapter 9

“Hey Johnny! We get to paint the outhouse!” James was thrilled to be in his new home back near his friend Johnny Wilson, and could hardly hide his excitement over being assigned this important responsibility. “Come on, let’s find some brushes.”

The men were busy in the yard, some painting the small wood framed house, others scattering straw around the yard to help the grass grow. The women had arrived that morning carrying ham biscuits and cherry pies, then busied themselves in the kitchen helping Sally hang curtains and settle the house. Putting the final touches on the Turner house was a community celebration. Later, James would often wonder how on such a perfect day he could make the biggest mistake of his life. But he did.

He and Johnny were busy slapping the white paint on the back of the outhouse when James suddenly got the idea.

“Hey Johnny, you wanna play a joke on my dad?”

“Now that’s a dumb question. Whacha got in mind?” Johnny asked with an eager grin on his face. “Whatever it is, count me in!

“Well...” James thought a minute. “How about when Dad comes to use the outhouse, let’s give him the surprise of his life! After he gets situated, let’s jump in just a hollering!”

“Yeah!” Johnny joined in. “We’ll scare the britches off him!” The boys had to stop painting for laughing so hard at their own joke.

Once they had the idea, they had difficulty sticking to their task. One would paint a few strokes while the other was on the look out. Then they would trade jobs, staking out the outhouse.

Finally out of paint, the boys had to leave their post long enough to replenish their supply. As luck would have it, Roy headed toward the outhouse as they scurried toward the house to refill the paint can.

“Slow down, Johnny.” James said trying to be mature about it. “Let’s just mosey over and get the paint—like we’ve got nothing else in mind. We’ll still have time to get back and scare him.”

“He’ll never suspect a thing.” Johnny slowed himself down to a quick walk, trying to follow James’s unhurried example.

Rounding the back of the house, James nodded to Mr. Murphy. “Can we borrow some paint?” he asked.

“Long as you bring it back,” Mr. Murphy teased.

Giggling like a couple of school girls, James and Johnny quickly refilled their paint can and started back to the outhouse.

All was clear. Roy had disappeared into the privy to take care of his business. James and Johnny crept up to the door without making even a peep, though they were already struggling to keep from laughing. This was perfect!

Silently, the boys laid their hands on the door to pull it open simultaneously. As though they were one, the boys crashed into the outhouse squawking like banty roosters.

What began as a yell to frighten became a yell of fright as the boys came eyeball to eyeball with Betty Byrd Barefoot! For an instant they stood frozen, shocked, in horror taking in the whole scene before them. Then, as if they had been released from some evil spell, their brains clicked into gear. Realizing their mistake, the boys were in a panic to get out of the outhouse as quickly as they had jumped into it, and they stumbled and tripped and fell over each other in their hurry to flee. Betty Byrd never moved, as if trying to convince herself they hadn't noticed her sitting there at all. Leaving the door wide open in their frenzy to exit, James and Johnny darted around behind the outhouse and across the back yard.

"How in the world did SHE get in there?" They looked at each other in bewilderment. Out of the corner of their eye, they noticed Roy leaning against the nearby oak tree, waiting politely for Betty Byrd to finish.

James and Johnny hightailed it for the woods at the back of the yard. Barely within the safety of the trees, they fell on their bellies howling with laughter.

James couldn't help but think, "Maybe there is justice in this world after all!"

Life would have been just about perfect except for the fact that each day brought his mother's delivery day closer. All of a sudden it seemed his mother's life was being measured by the sand in an hour glass—and the precious few granules in the top seemed determined to race toward the contour and slip through to join the rest of the sand already sitting at the bottom.

It was the dead of night when James felt his dad urgently shake him awake. "The baby's coming!" he whispered, though there was no one else to wake. "I've got to get Mother to the hospital. You'll be okay here 'til morning, then run on over next door to Murphy's. They'll be expecting you."

James sat up on the edge of his bed and let his bare feet touch the cold floor trying to get his eyes open. With the help of a couple of colorful pillows, James's bed doubled as a couch in the daytime. Whether bed or couch, it was placed in the corner of what was also the kitchen. James's parents shared the only bedroom. James waited silently for them to emerge together like ghostly shadows.

"How do I tell her goodbye if this is the last time I ever see her?" he wondered. It was an awful feeling to know someone he loved was in danger and not be able to do anything about it.

"Don't forget your hat, Roy." His mother was calm while Roy seemed to be flustered, racing in all directions but unable to get things together so they could get out the door. James stayed perched on the side of his bed, feeling a need to watch from afar—wanting to help yet feeling detached, alone, afraid.

Roy was intent on whisking his wife away, nervous that they reach the hospital as quickly as possible. But Sally seemed in no hurry as she paused to stand beside James where he sat. All of a sudden there didn't seem to be a need for words. She knew he needed her, and he was comforted with knowing she understood.

And then they were gone.

The darkness seemed to bare down on him and laugh in his face. He slept fitfully, and his dreams mocked him just as his thoughts did when he awoke. He dreamed he was a little boy again. Pretending to be his father, he slipped his feet into his father's shoes. But the shoes were too big and his legs too weak to lift them and no matter how hard he struggled, he ended up in a tangled mess in the middle of the kitchen floor. When he awoke he could feel the wetness of tears on his pillow, and he knew when it came to courage, he was just a little boy pretending.

Long before sun-up he was sitting on the front steps of the Murphy's front porch, unable to bear the emptiness at home any longer. Mrs. Murphy stumbled on him as she carried the slop jar out to empty at the outhouse. "Goodness sakes, child! You about gave me a heart attack!"

"Sorry, Mizz Murphy. I didn't mean to startle you." James stood politely.

"Go on now and get your hands washed. Breakfast is almost ready. We'll hear from Mr. Murphy soon as your mama's in the clear." James wondered if eternity could be any longer.

A week later, Sally and baby Jo Ann came home, two miracles in one. In no time at all, a soft blanket converted the dresser drawer into a bassinet.

"I can't believe God can make a whole person that tiny!" James held his finger out for Jo Ann to clench.

"I can't believe somebody that tiny can make so much noise!!" Roy laughed. "Shewwee! That girl can holler!" He gazed with pride at his little daughter settling comfortably in her new bed.

"I guess if she gets too loud, we could always shut the drawer!" James laughed but quickly stopped when he saw his mother's stern look.

Roy took Sally's hand and sat down beside her on the bed. "All kidding aside, the doctor's ordered complete bed-rest for Mother. She's not to even sit up for another week."

"Aunt Minnie's coming to help for a while." Sally added. "Roy needs to get back to work, but I'm sure you'll be a good help too, James."

James was relieved to have his mother home. There was just something about being home that felt safe. He was sure she'd be okay now.

Two weeks after Jo Ann was born Sally was able to sit up in bed for the first time. It would have been a wonderful day except for one thing.

It was also the day James's father died.

The Accident Chapter 10

“Mother sat up this morning, Johnny! Just like that!” James and Johnny had taken to playing at Johnny’s house while Sally recuperated at home. Johnny was as relieved as James that his friend’s mother was improving.

The boys were in the Wilson’s driveway playing marbles for keeps. Using a stick in the dirt, they drew a circle about the size of a burn barrel. Impatient to get the game started, both boys dumped their bag of marbles into the middle of the circle, saving out their favorite lucky shooter. On their knees, they would take turns knocking marbles out of the circle with the shooter. When a marble rolled out of the circle, it belonged to the boy whose shooter knocked it out. Fits often lapped up the marbles as they scattered and James was proud of the way he obediently deposited them at his feet, as if the dog wanted him to have them all.

“That dog’d do anything for me.” James boasted.

“Yeah—even cheat!” Johnny took the marbles from James’s pile that belonged to him. “If it were up to him, I wouldn’t have a one!”

“Smart dog, huh?” James gave Fits a good belly-rub while Johnny took aim.

It was James’s turn when a car hurriedly pulled into the driveway and stopped just short of their game. Mr. Wilson came to the front door to greet his unexpected guest but the visitor seemed content to stand in the yard near the boys. Both boys ignored the men, intent on their game. James had his shooter cupped on his index finger with his thumb all set to flick it into the pile of marbles when he heard the visitor say, “There’s been an accident down at the railroad crossing. Freight train hit a car broadside. Killed both fellas, a Mr. George Lewis and...” the man paused to look straight at James, “...and your daddy.”

James looked at the man blankly, his words impossible to understand.

“Your daddy’s dead.” The man was ruthless. “Don’t you tell your mama. They’re on their way over there to tell her right now.”

That was all it took. James was up off his knees and headed home without a moment’s hesitation. There was only one thought on his mind: he had to get to his mother first.

Like a wounded deer in hopeless flight from the bloodhound, James ran like he had never run before. Sliding belly up under the barbed wire fence, he barely paused. Crashing through the tall grass, jumping over fallen tree trunks--racing like he was trying to outrun the panic that dogged his steps. At that moment it seemed his life depended on his arriving first. His mother’s life too. Blind even to Fits as he kept pace beside him, James finally broke through the wooded lot behind his house, flew across the front yard and in through the back door. Aunt Minnie was fixing supper in the kitchen, but he did not stop to speak.

He found his mother in the bedroom propped up with pillows. She was still pale and weak. He forced himself to stop at her door, and the panic seemed to slam him from behind, making his heart pound in terror. Trembling, he knelt

by her bed and clung to her hand. "Mother, there's been an accident. They are on their way to tell you now: Dad is dead!"

The pew was hard and cold. Though sitting beside Mr. Murphy, James was very much alone at his father's funeral. Even as the pastor conducted the service, the doctor was examining his mother at home.

James watched the pastor's mouth move and tried to listen.

"A shadow is cast, my head is bowed, I offer a silent prayer of thanks to God for the life of John Roy Turner." The tears flowed down Pastor Griffin's cheeks and he made no effort to wipe them away. "Forgetting his own personal needs, he seemed always to think of others only. He was my strong arm in the labors of my pastorate on the Danville Circuit, for he was at my side day and night. He would leave his business or work or home day or night and take me to the places of sorrow and sin to aid and to rescue the needy and fallen, and so were our labors together. His life was one continuous prayer, talking and walking with God."

Struggling to keep his voice under control, the pastor continued. "How stunned I was by that call announcing his sudden death and requesting me to come and share the cross of the hour with his family and loved ones. How can I repeat in this limited space the many things I heard said of his life? I cannot. But, one thing alone is enough to be said, for it is complete in itself. Before entering the church for the funeral today, a woman humbly clad and with a face lined by care, came, offering her testimony in the last hearing of his stewardship of life. With broken voice and tears of gratitude and grief, she said to me these simple words. 'It mattered not how great his personal care or difficult his circumstances, Mr. Turner always found time and a way to help me feed and clothe my fatherless children. The best friend I had on earth is gone.'"

James heard the words, but their meaning was lost. His heart was swallowed up in grief at the awful absence of his dad and the dreadful worry for the life of his mother.

His downcast eyes rested on the wood stove. The same woodstove where he had knelt just weeks ago beside his father as they worked to get the fire started. It was there his father had told him his mother was going to have another baby and had wrapped his arms around him as if to protect him. James closed his eyes hoping to feel his father's arms around him again.

Instantly, his own question to his father that day crashed through his thoughts, dispelling any comfort he had sought. "How can you trust God when He let us down, Dad?"

What was it his father had said?

Mr. Murphy stood and motioned for James to follow. It was only a few paces from the steps of the church to the graveyard, but it seemed like miles. James kept his eyes on Mr. Murphy's shoes as they walked in front of him, and followed them until they stopped. He sat when told to sit. He stood when told to stand. He shook hands with a seemingly infinite number of people who said they

loved his father. That he had always been there for them. That they couldn't imagine life without him.

And then he went home.

The door was closed to the bedroom and Aunt Minnie would not let him go in to see his mother. "She's resting, James. The doctor said, 'Milk Leg.' Lord have mercy!" James had no idea what she was talking about.

The tiny house was crowded with people, and they spilled out into the yard. It was like they needed to be there, needed to be of some help to James and Sally in order to find comfort in their own grief. But what could they do? There was nothing anyone could do to bring Roy back or give Sally health.

James felt like a stranger in his own home. He didn't know where to go or what to do, and the panic mounting in his chest grew heavier and heavier until he was sure he was going to suffocate.

Out of nowhere, there was Johnny with Fits at his heels. If ever there was a time when James would have liked to call him 'Sweet Johnny Wilson,' this was it. No one noticed the boys as they slipped around back and headed for the woods.

The boys found a fallen trunk to sit on and James was the one who broke the silence. "Ya know, the other man killed had a son too. The accident happened just outside their house. They said his son was out in the yard when it happened. He saw it all."

Johnny groaned in sympathy, "That must have been terrible!"

"Yeah." James agreed. "But I keep thinking--if I could have been there, maybe I could have done something--someway I could have stopped it from happening!" Johnny hung his head sadly while James buried his face in Fits' heavy coat to hide the tears that would not stop.

It was almost dark when James and Fits returned home. The lights were on in the house but no one was in the kitchen. He could hear his mother's voice in the bedroom, but it was so frail he almost didn't recognize it as hers. "The boy just lost his father. You can't take him away from his mother too."

"If we don't, he won't have a mother to come back to! There's no other way, Sally. I've got to get back to the farm--and it'll be good for James to get with my boys. There's plenty work he can do to earn his keep."

"Let me tell him, Minnie. At least let him hear it from me."

Hearing a sound at the door, Aunt Minnie turned to see James standing there. She wiped her hands nervously on her apron like she'd been caught in the middle of mischief. She brushed abruptly past James without a word and left the two of them alone.

James moved closer to his mother's bed to be able to see her face. It seemed to James that his mother was in horrible pain, like it hurt her even to breathe. Softly she said, "It's phlebitis, James. Doctor says I'm not to move my leg—not for anything. Hurts too much to move anyway. He says it'll be weeks at least." She didn't tell him it could kill her.

“What about Jo Ann, Mother? Who’s going to take care of her?”

“Mizz Murphy’s going to help out. We’ll be just fine.”

“Mother, I can help. I know I can!”

“You’re gonna have to trust me, Son. Aunt Minnie leaves in the morning, so you better get packed.”

There wasn’t much to pack, just a few belongings wrapped up in a brown paper grocery sack.

While visiting, Aunt Minnie had been given his bed, and James had chosen to spread out his blanket under the kitchen table. But tonight, he gathered his makeshift bed and moved it to the floor at the foot of his parents’ bed. It seemed like the closest he could get to his father--and he wanted to make sure his mother didn’t quit breathing.

Hoeing Tobacco Chapter 11

The ride to Reidsville, NC was only about 30 minutes from Danville, VA, but James felt like he had entered another world. An only child for 12 years and accustomed to filling hours alone, now he could not find a place in this house full of boys to have a moment of privacy. Though he knew how to work hard cutting firewood and helping out at his dad's grocery store, he was ignorant about how to milk a cow or hoe tobacco. Aunt Minnie's four boys crowded both sides of his 12 years, and they seemed bigger, and stronger, and smarter. James felt like he was a rooster thrown into a chicken house full of cocks--all vying for top spot in the pecking order--and he didn't even have a beak!

In 1933, before the dangers of smoking were medically documented, raising tobacco was a primary crop in North Carolina. As James began to work the endless fields, he became convinced that Aunt Minnie and Uncle Ronald were responsible for 99.9 percent of the entire southern crop! Aunt Minnie was right about one thing, there was plenty of work for him to earn his keep.

The first day was the worst. In obedience to Aunt Minnie, his two youngest cousins led him out to the field nearest the house.

"See here, James. You do it like that." Using a hoe, Richard loosened the dirt around the seedling, expertly uprooting the grass and weeds without damaging the plant.

Robert wanted a part in training his cousin too, and took his hoe to show him the next step. "Then you just hill up the dirt around the plant like that." In two or three easy flicks of the hoe, the job was done.

"Nothing to it." Richard encouraged. "Now, here's your hoe and you can start right here."

James took the hoe and acted like this was old stuff. He watched the boys as they settled to work in the rows on either side of him before turning to his own.

Trying to look more confident than he felt, James started to work. He dug the hoe in to loosen the dirt around the first tiny plant, and by accident dug the whole thing up, roots and all. Horrified, he looked both ways to see if either boy had witnessed his blunder. They were busy with their own rows and didn't pay him any mind.

As quickly as possible, James pressed the plant back into the soil and using his hands carefully gathered the dirt up around the seedling to give it the desired support.

With a sigh of relief, he moved up the row a few inches to the next plant and began again, this time taking a little more care where the hoe was digging. The second time went much better and he was relieved.

One glance towards his cousins drained any relief he felt. Starting together, his cousins had soon pulled away from him and were well on their way down their rows—literally leaving him in the dust. That would never do. How

could they think he knew anything at all if he couldn't even keep up? He had to catch them to maintain any self-respect--no two ways about it.

Rushing to remove the weeds around the third plant, he again miscalculated and this time chopped up the plant he was trying to nurture. But there was no time to stop and repair—that would make him all the farther behind. Desperate to catch them, James stuffed the plant into the pocket of his pants and hurried to the next plant.

It seemed his cousins were progressing down their rows like they were out for a stroll on a summer day. Like any sucker could do it. But the harder James tried, the farther they seemed to get from him and the more damaged plants were wadded into his pocket. By the end of the row, James had a pocket full of seedlings, which presented a new problem. What to do with the evidence?

Thankful the other boys had their backs to him, he used the hoe to dig a shallow hole, emptied his pocket into the hole, and replaced the dirt on top of the plants. Tapping the dirt pile with the toe of his shoe, he leveled it. Now farther behind, he hurriedly began the next row. Lucky for James, this slick trick worked many, many times over the next few weeks.

Then his secret was almost discovered. He was at supper with his cousins, Aunt Minnie, Uncle Ronald, and all the field hands. The moment his uncle finished the blessing, the boys set right to filling their plates to appease their grumbling stomachs.

James was looking for the butter for his sweet potato when he heard Uncle Ronald say to one of the hired hands, "Saw the strangest thing today. There are piles of tobacco seedlings buried in little holes all over the fields. "

"Hmmm." The hired hand replied looking perplexed. "You have any idea what kind of critter would dig up plants and then bury them in little piles?"

"Beats me," Uncle Ronald replied. "Thought I'd seen it all."

"I'll keep an eye out for tracks and maybe we can get to the bottom of it."

James never buried another plant.

On Saturdays everyone was in the fields by sun up and worked until the sun was blistering hot in the afternoon. School days the boys could get a couple hours hoeing done before breakfast. Sunday's were the only day they didn't pick up a hoe. That was the Lord's Day. But even on Sundays the cows had to be milked and fed.

Once James learned the firm squeeze and the steady rhythm, he was a good milker. In fact, that became the highlight of his day. It was the only time he could be alone. The barn was invitingly quiet except for the sound of the milk squirting into the bucket. The 2 lazy cows were content to let him work as they munched their hay.

James spent this time talking to his dad. At first he was kind of shy about it. Like if someone overheard him they would laugh at him. But soon he grew confident in the seclusion of the barn and he poured his heart out.

“You remember that day you told me mother was going to have a baby?” James was quiet as if waiting for his father to respond. “I was mad cause God had let us down. I didn’t think there was much at all to be glad about. That’s exactly what I’m feeling now, Dad. I need you to help me with my school work. The school year’s almost over—what a lousy time to start a new school!

“You’re an expert driver, Dad. Didn’t you see that train coming? If you had just waited a few seconds longer...! All you had to do was put your foot on the brake!” James was so intense with his one-way conversation that he pulled too hard on the cow. She stomped her hind leg in warning protest, and James came back to reality.

“This is the day that the Lord has made....” The thought came out of nowhere and seemed almost audible. James stopped milking a second to look over his shoulder just to make sure he was really alone. He had heard those words every day of his life--until the day his father died. It felt like they had been carved into his brain. Yet suddenly it was as if he were hearing them for the very first time.

“That’s what you said that day, Dad! ‘God’s in charge of each day of our lives....’” His dad had been telling him that from the day he was born, when he gave the blessing at breakfast. How could James have missed it so many times? It wasn’t rejoice and be glad because life was always happy, but because God was always in control. And like it or not--He could always be trusted!

James felt a glimmer of hope.

This Day
Chapter 12

The oil lamps flickered as if struggling against the darkness. James and his cousins had been doing their homework by the dim light at the kitchen table, but everyone was finished now except James.

Chores were done, the supper dishes washed, and the hired hands were looking forward to retiring to the bunkhouse. As usual, when the day's work was finished, Uncle Ronald was ready to lead the household in evening devotions and dismiss them for the night.

But James was stuck on an arithmetic problem, delaying the bedtime routine for everyone. "There are 18 animals having a total of 50 legs. How many chickens and how many cows were there in the barn?"

James bit the end of his pencil while trying to think. "If you asked me, I'd say forget the legs and just count the cows and chickens! Jeepers Creepers!"

"James!" Aunt Minnie's voice startled his thoughts. "The whole house is waiting for you, and you're sitting there talking to yourself. Now hurry it up and get done!" Aunt Minnie reached for a sock to darn while she waited.

James set his mind back on the business at hand, but the page of word problems seemed to grow longer and longer. He was distracted repeatedly by the hired hands shuffling restlessly around the table where he worked, with long drawn out yawns to show they were tired of waiting for him. Periodically one would mutter, "That boy's slow as molasses," or another would look over his shoulder to see how many more problems he had yet to finish, giving an impatient sigh. The harder James tried to hurry, the more impossible it became to think.

It was hopeless. Shutting his book noisily and grabbing his pencils, he stood to address the room. "That's it—I've had it. I am leaving!"

Aunt Minnie didn't even look up from her darning. "That's fine, James."

James searched her face to see if she had understood him, and found no clue.

"I'm running away and I won't be back!"

"Bye, James. Come on back and see us sometime." The others in the room dismissed him as if this was an everyday occurrence. He knew they were bluffing.

"I'm going to pack my stuff now. I'm going home!" He clarified one more time in case they hadn't understood.

Nobody made a move to console or stop him, so he continued his charade to the bedroom to begin packing.

He and his cousins shared a room at the top of the steps. He and Richard and Robert shared the double bed against the wall while the older two shared the bed nearest the door. A single dresser housed most of their clothes, a drawer for each boy's belongings. The hard wood floor moaned under his weight, as he made his way to the dresser and rummaged under his clothes looking for the paper bag he had brought his clothes in the day he arrived.

“Maybe I won’t ever get out of the 5th grade, but I sure-as-shootin’ can get out of Reidsville!” He tried to bully his fear with determination. The window above the dresser was black against the night outside. James’s hand withdrew the paper bag reluctantly from the bottom of the drawer. What if they didn’t try to stop him? What if nobody cared enough to convince him to stay?

Slowly, he opened the paper bag and began filling it with his clothes. Folding each article meticulously, he made the packing take as long as possible, giving the family members ample time to come and persuade him to stay.

No one came.

His belongings packed, he stalled trying to think of something else he needed to do. He could hear Uncle Ronald’s voice downstairs reading the scripture for the evening devotions. Leaving or not, it cut him to think they had begun without him.

Not knowing what else to do, he up-ended the paper bag over the opened dresser drawer, and dumped out all of it’s contents. Beginning again, he folded and repacked his belongings back in the bag a second time. His thoughts were growing frantic. “Surely they just need a little more time. They don’t really expect me to leave!”

James finished repacking a second time without interruption. Aunt Minnie was giving the closing prayer as he stumbled loudly down the stairs. James appeared in the room at the Amen.

“Well, I’m packed. I’m leaving.”

“Good bye, James.” Aunt Minnie didn’t carry on a bit. Uncle Ronald waved and turned to head towards his bedroom.

James shuffled out the back door along with the hired hands who were heading for the bunkhouse. “Keep an eye out for the copperheads,” one of them reminded him. “They like to come out at night.” And then he was alone in the dark: the kind of dark where you can’t see your hand in front of your face.

Stumbling around to the front yard, he felt like his life was over. It was miles of pitch-dark country road into town. And how in the world would he get all the way home? Throwing his bag on the damp grass, he leaned against the pear tree on the outskirts of the front yard.

“When they see I’m determined, they’ll come and try to change my mind.” He leaned against the tree trunk and waited. And waited. And then he watched as the kerosene lamps were snuffed out one by one and the house disappeared in the darkness.

James was stunned. Nobody was coming. Nobody cared!

He was glad it was dark so no one could see the tears. He sank to the ground and pulled his legs up to his chest, resting his head on his knees.

“Dad, I miss you so bad! It’s not fair!”

The darkness remained silent.

“I could make you so proud. Why did you have to go and leave me? ”

“Are you going to trust Me?” The question took center stage in his thoughts and demanded an answer, like the answer to this question was more important to find than the solution to the desperate emptiness he felt in the pit of his stomach. He raised his head, but there was only darkness.

This day right now—when he was homesick, missing his father and worried about his mother—this is the day the Lord had made. Could he trust the God who had made this day? James knew the answer. His dad had shown him the answer every day of his life when he chose to rejoice and be glad regardless of the circumstances.

In the quietness of the night, James no longer spoke to his earthly father but rather his Heavenly Father. “How do I trust You?”

His understanding became clear as he prayed quietly. He had a choice to make—and he knew running away was not the way to choose.

James stood to his feet with his bag of clothes under his arm, and made his way back to the house. He quietly squirmed in between his sleeping cousins. Richard stirred to make room for James and whispered, “Welcome back.” James closed his eyes and slept peacefully for the first night since his father’s death.

James lived at Aunt Minnie’s for three months before he received the good news: his mother was out of danger and gaining strength! She was making plans for him to come home soon.

Needing to tell someone in his excitement, James sat down to write Johnny Wilson a letter.

July 26, 1934

Dear Johnny,

By the time you get this letter, I’ll be coming home! Can you believe it? I can’t wait! Seems like forever since we played that last game of marbles.

Something’s been on my mind to talk to you about for a long, long time. I’m ashamed to say it, but I’ve been too chicken to ask you. But it’s so important that I can’t let it go any longer. Johnny, how do things stand between you and the Lord?

We’ll talk when I see you.

Your Friend,
James

PS I’m in the sixth grade!!

Epilogue

Struggling through grade school, James thought the best he could hope for was a 7th grade education and a life spent working at the cotton mill. That would have been true except for one thing: he trusted God. When a person trusts God, there are no limits. James completed high school and went on to finish college and seminary. There is no way to explain this except by the grace of God.

Relatives and friends helped Sally Turner keep her family together. She also took in sewing to help pay the bills, but she had little to help James with his education. James milked many a cow to pay his tuition bills, a skill developed in his time at Aunt Minnie's.

James's longing to share Christ with Johnny Wilson grew into a desire to reach children all over the world. For over thirty years he worked as a missionary traveling all over the South Pacific and parts of South East Asia teaching pastors and teachers how to reach children with the gospel. Because he trusted God, he learned to share his faith boldly without fear.

The early years of his life not only influenced what he did with his life, but also what kind of person he became. Having experienced poverty, tragedy and heartbreak so deeply, he was able to see the needs of people around him and respond with heartfelt sympathy. Thinking about the way he reached out to people, two images immediately come to my mind.

One is the image of a man most would call a beggar. He lived in one of the tropic islands where James served as a missionary. His clothes were tattered and hung in rags on his thin shoulders. His legs were withered and useless, tucked up under him as he sat on a piece of wood with small wheels about two inches off the ground. Daily he sat outside the post office with his tin cup held up, hoping to attract donations from busy people as they passed. The post office was a daily stop for James and his heart was tender towards the needs of this man. Although he did not have much money, James would give the man what he had, and then stop to talk to him as an equal. The look on the man's face said it all. Like his father, James was not merely a benefactor--he was a friend.

The second image is of James on market day. The merchants and farmers displayed their wares and produce on the dusty streets. It was common knowledge; a smart shopper never paid the asking price but bartered and haggled to a fraction of the original cost. James had little interest in being a smart shopper. Instead of bargaining to get a better price, James often paid double the beginning price, knowing the physical needs of the vendor were great.

I knew James for almost 50 years. He was my father. His last 5 years made an indelible imprint on my life. He spent those years digressing through Alzheimer's and suffering from a seizure disorder, being completely bedridden for the last 3½ years.

I will never forget one morning at breakfast. At this time he was wheelchair bound, his speech halting as his mind searched for words. But he

knew what was happening to him and he struggled to communicate his greatest fear. "What will I do when I forget God?" The question haunted me because I did not have an answer to comfort him.

As the disease descended, it gradually stole my father. My mother faithfully cared for his body, but there were only short glimpses of the real person she had loved for 55 years. One day, near the end, there was a bright moment when he was mentally with us. Hoping to find some way to please him, Mom asked this simple question. "James, what would you like to do today?"

His answer did not come easy because words were almost impossible for him to find. Slowly it became surprisingly clear what he was saying. "I just want to do what God wants me to do."

James trusted God in life and in death. Maybe James did forget God. But in life and in death, God never forgot James!